

# The origins of Turkish Gothic: The adaptations of Stoker's *Dracula* in Turkish literature and film

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## **Bionote**

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## **Abstract**

The adaptations of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) in Turkish literature and film are relatively unknown by Western academia and have been poorly discussed by Turkish critics and scholars on the grounds of being superficial copies of the original. However, they have great importance not only for Turkish Horror studies but also for recently formed Globalgothic studies. In 1928, a novel named *Vlad the Impaler* was published in Ottoman Turkish by Ali Rıza Seyfi, a historian and a poet from newly founded Republic of Turkey. As the novel's name suggests, Seyfi uses the historical character known as Vlad Tepes and his connection to Turkish history, which dates back to the Ottoman Empire period. However, Seyfi's novel was an adaptation of Stoker's *Dracula* with engaging modifications. A quarter-century later, this adaptation was adapted into film under the name of *Dracula in Istanbul* (1953) which became the first Horror film to survive in Turkish cinema history and the first *Dracula* adaptation made by a Muslim country. Contrary to popular opinion in Western academia, the film is also the first adaptation in which Count Dracula's fangs are seen. This article provides close readings of both adaptations by focusing on representations of Turkish national identity in particular. Considering both Gothic criticism and adaptation theories, I argue that these works lay the foundations of Turkish Gothic, a genre which has not yet been canonised in Turkish studies, and that they serve as a first step towards a Turkish contribution to Globalgothic studies.

**Key words:** Globalgothic, *Dracula*, vampire, adaptation, national identity, Turkish literature and film.

As the grounding of the modern vampire narrative in Turkey, Ali Rıza Seyfi's *Kazıklı Voyvoda* (1928),<sup>1</sup> hereafter *Vlad the Impaler*,<sup>2</sup> appears in a time of change, modernisation, and reform during the first years of the Republic of Turkey. As widely known, the publication of Stoker's novel coincides with the time when Britain faced with the anxieties of a changing world evoked by the technological and scientific advancements of the nineteenth century. A great deal of literary criticism, therefore, represents Dracula and accordingly his successor vampire figures as the reflection of political and social anxieties of a particular culture in a particular period of time. For decades, Stoker's *Dracula* has gone beyond its cultural boundaries and has been revisited many times in different mediums and by different cultures. These visits appeared mostly in Judeo-Christian countries with similar religious backgrounds, yet each culture interpreted the vampire figure according to their own historical anxieties. However, when the character of Count Dracula appeared in Turkish literature, it did not only construct the literary role of the vampire figure for the first time by emphasising the discussions of national identity and race, but also introduced a new genre to Turkish audiences: the Gothic.

Dracula's story in Turkey began in 1928, when a novelist, historian, and poet Ali Rıza Seyfi wrote the first vampire novel in Turkish literature. This novel was published as an original story in Ottoman Turkish with no reference to Bram Stoker and his novel. However, with its alterations that relate the plot to Ottoman history and Turkish nationalist propaganda of the 1920s, Seyfi's novel demonstrates the characteristics of what Linda Hutcheon calls, "transcultural adaptation". In 1953, this adaptation was in turn adapted into film in a time of quest for development and innovation in Turkish cinema. Directed by Mehmet Muhtar, *Drakula İstanbul'da*, hereafter *Dracula in Istanbul*, was harshly criticized by cinema critics of

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<sup>1</sup> This novel was relatively unknown until in 1997, when cinema historian and scholar Giovanni Scognamiglio translated it from Ottoman Turkish to modern Turkish and was reissued under the title of *Dracula in Istanbul*, alluding to the 1953 film adaptation. In the article, the original name of the novel will be used for convenience.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, Turkish quotes, lines, and the names of Turkish works will be translated by the author.

the time, yet recently it has gained national and international recognition due to its successful creation of a gothic atmosphere in a Turkish context.

In this article, I argue that these adaptations not only constitute the origins of Turkish Gothic by transforming Stoker's text through national identity discussions of their time rather than copying the original, but also pave the way for a broader discussion of the Gothic genre in contemporary Turkish literature and film by evoking the foundations of the term Globalgothic. I will develop my argument through three parts in this article. While the first part provides a short overview of the Gothic scholarship and adaptation theories that I will be referring to throughout the article, the second and third parts cover the close readings of the adaptations by disambiguating the strong relationships between the texts and the historical context of Turkey which will shape the core of my argument. The conclusion of the article challenges the hitherto limited discussion of the Gothic genre in Turkey and aims to extend Globalgothic studies by paying attention to a distinctively Turkish Gothic.

### **Transcultural Adaptation and Globalgothic**

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon argues that “there is a kind of dialogue between the society in which the works, both the adapted text and adaptation, are produced and that in which they are received, and both are in dialogue with the works themselves” (Hutcheon 149). If we think of the adaptation process as a kind of wormhole which opens to a different time and place than ours, in Hutcheon's theory, not only stories but also historical and social circumstances that create them travel through this wormhole and form again with the conditions of the new world that they arrive at. Though it may sound scientific, this example explains why transcultural adaptation is similar to time travel of a possible kind.

According to Hutcheon, an adaptation is a retelling of an old story by “recreation” and “reinterpretation” (8), but adaptation from one culture to another should offer more than just a

translation of that interpretation. Although it has been around for centuries, the reason why adaptation from one culture to another became particularly popular from the 1980s onwards is due to the results of cultural globalization, a term defined as “the process of cultural flows across the world” through “contacts between people and their cultures – their ideas, their values, their way of life –” (Kumaravadivelu 37-38). For Hutcheon, transcultural adaptation is the product of cultural globalization, and thus, needs to establish certain cultural rules during the adaptation process such as a change in language, place and time period, and mostly a shift in the political valence and racial and/or gender politics (145-147). However, when these changes are made, it does not necessarily mean the adaptation process is over. In order to complete the process the context and the meaning of the adaptation should be synchronous as “for audiences experiencing an adaptation ... cultural and social meaning has to be adapted and conveyed to the new environment” (149). The context and the meaning can only be synchronic after they are filtered through the different philosophies, histories, national identities, religions, races, genders, and moral values between the original and the adapted audience. In this way, stories travel in time and they are received by an audience who can actually make sense of what they experience.

Similar to transcultural adaptations, Globalgothic, too, attaches importance to cultural flows formed by globalization. In *Globalgothic* (2013) Glennis Byron argues that “gothic has energetically participated in the cultural flows and deterritorialisations that characterise globalisation”, and thus, the emphasis given to American and Western culture has been eradicated leaving their places to multidirectional flows. For Byron, thanks to “the increasing mobility and fluidity of people and products in the globalised world”, we are now more aware of the fact that archaic figures of the Gothic genre such as ghosts, vampires, witches, zombies, and monsters “have their counterparts in other cultures, however differently these may be inflected by specific histories and belief systems” (3). These transformations that the Gothic

figures experience are, however, always connected to certain cultures, geographical territories, or national contexts and how they experience the globalization process. Thus, the representations of geographical or national identities constructed, developed, and conveyed through Gothic tropes are vitally important for the implications of Globalgothic. In this respect, transcultural adaptations play a crucial role in Globalgothic studies.

The adaptations discussed in this article provide great examples of this cooperation between transcultural adaptations and Globalgothic through multidirectional cultural flows. Although globalization is a process that occurred only after the 1980s and these adaptations belong to the period before then, it is an indisputable fact that multidirectional cultural flows were present long before the *invention* of the term globalization – even if they were less prominent. In fact, the geopolitical location of modern Turkey, its classic attribution as the bridge between Europe and Asia, its long history as the home of several civilizations and the ancient trade routes, such as the Silk Road, indicate that for centuries, the lands of Turkey has been the actual source of multidirectional cultural flows connecting the West and the East together in a sense. In this respect, Napoleon Bonaparte’s well known quote, “If the Earth were a single state, Constantinople would be its capital” should be reconsidered. The stories of different religions, cultures, and ideas that Istanbul contains within itself provide a perfect basis for discussions of transcultural adaptations and Globalgothic. This is why the adaptations of *Dracula* – one of the most well-known and the most adapted Gothic texts of all time – in Turkish literature and film tell us not only how the Gothic and the vampire figure were interpreted in Turkey, but also how they contribute to emerging Globalgothic studies by initiating an exchange between Western Gothic and Turkish culture that led to the formation of a distinctly Turkish Gothic.

### **The Great Turks vs. Dracula: Ali Rıza Seyfi’s *Vlad the Impaler* (1928)**

The Turkish War of Independence fought against Western imperialist powers ended in victory in 1923 and out of the fallen ashes of the Ottoman Empire, a new nation was born. The following years were the time that Turkish national identity began to be constituted by reforms and disengagement from the Ottoman influence. Ali Rıza Seyfi's adaptation *Vlad the Impaler* coincides with the first years of this revolutionary time and has the title of being the first and only literary *Dracula* adaptation around the world until the 1960s (Melton 206).<sup>3</sup> To adapt the novel, Seyfi changed the characters' names for Turkish names, shifted the time and place of the story from 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain to Turkey in the 1920s, and changed the synchrony between the context and the meaning that Hutcheon discusses. To put it more clearly, he effectively created a transcultural adaptation.

Seyfi's adaptation opens with a brief explanation by an unknown character who tells the story of the novel's discovery on a ferry in Istanbul. This short opening resembles the introduction to Bram Stoker's novel and serves as a preface to the book, creating a characteristically Gothic effect from the beginning. In this way, Seyfi also provides readers with an introduction to epistolary form. After this, Azmi – who is the Turkish equivalent of Jonathan Harker – begins his journey to Transylvania as a solicitor's assistant. The novel continues in a similar manner to Stoker's original text with the exception of a few minor changes. Renfield's character is removed from the plot and Dracula never encounters Mina. Instead of London, Dracula comes to Istanbul and at the end of the novel is killed by the hunter group. This change in location, from London to Istanbul, initiates the process of transcultural adaptation.

As David Punter suggests, Gothic fiction deals with “the impossibility of escape from history”, combined with the fact that “past can never be left behind” and will manifest itself

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<sup>3</sup> The Icelandic edition of *Dracula* (1900) has not yet been officially referred as the first adaptation due to lack of any comprehensive published study.

constantly “to exact a necessary price” (Punter and Byron 55). In Seyfi’s adaptation, this relationship with the past is fully exploited, more so, in fact, than in Stoker’s text. Since Dracul is a name for a dynasty in Transylvanian history, there is still controversy about which of the Wallachian rulers named Dracul Stoker got his inspiration from.<sup>4</sup> However, the one that inspired Seyfi was definitely Vlad Tepes, a significant enemy of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century. The Ottoman side of the story tells that, having stayed captive in the Court for years, Vlad was sent to his motherland, Wallachia, and soon started to show disloyalty to the Sultan. When he became one of the cruellest tyrants in world history, impaling people was the most famous of his methods. Records show that he would order his soldiers to strip the skin from Turkish captives’ feet, pour salt on them and make goats lick those feet. Once he even had a few women’s breasts hacked off and had their children’s head stitched to their bosom instead (Simsirgil 89-185). A Western account also suggests that “Dracula may have used ‘germ warfare’, as he reputedly paid Wallachians infected with diseases such as syphilis or tuberculosis to dress as Ottomans and enter enemy camps, thus spreading disease to the Turks” (Beresford 84).

Although, in Romania, Vlad Tepes was regarded as a national hero who defended his country from Turkish oppressors, he has been known as a cruel enemy by Turks throughout the centuries. Thus, Seyfi strengthened the connection between Count Dracula and Vlad Tepes in his adaptation by using these historical facts. During his journey to Bistritz, Azmi writes in his journal that Guzin (Mina) recalled the historical figure Voivode Dracul as soon as she heard the name of Count Dracula:

Guzin knows well the bloody, terrifying and dreadful deeds that Voivode Dracul committed in the history of Turkish Empire and the period of Mehmed the Second. She told me, with glowing eyes bursting with anger, the tortures

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on the topic, see Collins, “The Originality of Bram Stoker’s Character Dracula”.

that this wild and cruel monster of the history did to Turks and other people.  
(Seyfi 10)

Guzin's deep interest in history and her angry attitude towards Voivode Dracul attract Azmi's attention. When he encounters the Transylvanian couple who cross themselves and fearfully refuse to answer his questions about the Count, Azmi remembers Guzin's words and suspects the peasants associate the Count with Voivode Dracul.

In his well-known essay "The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization" (1990) Stephen D. Arata argues that "late-Victorian Gothic in general and *Dracula* in particular, continually calls our attention to the cultural context surrounding and informing the text, and insists that we take that context into account" (622). When we look at the historical context of Seyfi's adaptation, we see that the Ottomans were defeated at the end of the First World War, and Western imperialist countries were ready to have their share of Ottoman soil. The Turkish War of Independence ended on 24 July 1923 and the Republic of Turkey was founded by Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk, meaning the father of Turks) on 29 October 1923.

When Seyfi wrote his adaptation, Turkey was only five years old and nationalist propaganda was at its peak. As a historian, Seyfi mostly wrote historical novels mentioning the great achievements the Turks made. However, he did not support the narrow-mindedness that the Ottomans adopted before their fall and took a stand with the reformists. Consequently, after the foundation of Turkey he started to work as a translator and continued to write on Turkishness, nationalism, and Mustafa Kemal's great leadership (Yildiz 89-109). This is why his adaptation demonstrates the nationalist spirit depicted in Atatürk's words: "The power you need, is present in your noble blood" (898).

Turkish blood was one of the most important symbols of national identity at the time. Indeed, the red colour of the Turkish flag was a representation of the Turkish blood that was



shed by the soldiers in the War of Independence. This is why Seyfi uses this symbol frequently in his adaptation.

I was being the stooge of this unthinkable terrifying creature to go into Istanbul, into my dearest country! There, this damned thing was going to drink Turkish blood as much as he wants and create a cursed and disastrous neighbourhood for himself. My insane anger overflowed again, I had the idea to save the world from this devil grandson of Bloody Voivode. (Seyfi 70-71)

As a nationalist who believes that the blood represents the nation and the race, Azmi becomes racist towards the Count after realizing he is with the grandson of Vlad the Impaler in Vlad's castle. In the above passage, he thinks of the tortures that Voivode Dracul carried out upon Turkish people in this castle and gets furious both at himself, as he is about to help the Count move to Istanbul, and at the Count because of his endless hunger for Turkish blood. Dr. Resuhi (Van Helsing) also mentions the phrase "Turkish blood" in his speech to the vampire hunter team:

Isn't that strange, my fellows? We will prevent a monster who centuries ago was not satiated with Turkish blood, from drinking Turkish blood again in Istanbul and destroy him while armies, states could not. Who would believe this? God, is it possible to believe? (Seyfi 169)

When Dr. Resuhi gathers the team that includes Azmi, Dr. Afif (Jack), Turan (Arthur) and Ozdemir (Quincey), he says that they should determine their "war plan" (168). He explicitly emphasises the fact that Dracula's hunger is again for Turkish blood since he was an enemy of Turks for centuries. Besides, he seems proud that he and his vampire-hunting team will be the ones who manage to get rid of this "bloodthirsty monster". Recalling Stoker's emphasis on blood and race in *Dracula*, Fred Botting argues that "by engaging in battle with Dracula, Van Helsing's vampire-killers reawaken racial memories and myths of

blood and honour” (99). In Sadan’s (Lucy) diary entries, Turan, Dr. Afif and Ozdemir are all described as great Turkish men with military backgrounds. Sadan writes to Guzin about how all of her suitors fought in several battles in the Turkish War of Independence and how they tell stories about the great history that brave and powerful Turkish soldiers had written in the war (73-76). The emphasis placed upon Turkish blood and race during the 1920s is clearly revealed in Seyfi’s adaptation, through the discussions of nationalism and race that lead the characters to a war with the Count.

Considering the rise of imperialist ideologies in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, Arata interprets *Dracula* as “a narrative of reverse colonization,” which “expresses both fear and guilt” as “the coloniser Britain sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous form” (623). In *Vlad the Impaler*, however, Dracula is the colonizer, the Western imperialist who tries to colonize the Turkish blood, and thereby, Turkish national identity. Furthermore, Arata states that “in the heart of the reverse colonization narrative is the fear of seeing Britons ultimately dissolving into Romanians or vampires or savages” (631). By extension, Seyfi’s use of nationalism reveals the fear of “dissolving into Westerners,” since what Turkish people tried to do in the War of Independence was precisely to prohibit their national identity from being lost to the imperialist aspirations of the Western world.

The Count’s persistent enthusiasm about going to Istanbul reveals more about his nationalist spirit and his insidious plan for colonization. The night that Azmi finds out that Vlad is actually the ancestor of the Count sheds further light upon this idea and Dracula’s interest in his country’s history, particularly in regard to its connection to Ottoman history:

I asked the Count some questions about Transylvanian history, which is relevant to my nation’s history, the heroic Turkish armies and raiders, and to old Turkish political ideas [...] While he was talking about the past, the events,

and especially the wars of this country, he had enthusiasm, strength and anger as if he had been present at all of those moments [...] In particular, he was trying to narrate the events related to the Turkish Empire in a slapdash manner. It was quite normal because he couldn't behave in another way towards a Turk. He wouldn't be tactless enough to speak highly and proudly of the man who was his namesake and committed those bloody, cruel deeds and tortures against Turks – the man who broke his oath many times and gained epithets in our history such as Devil Voivode and Vlad the Impaler – even though he was a national hero for Transylvanians. (Seyfi 51)

Dracula's enthusiastic speech on Transylvanian history and his omission of details about the Turkish Empire provide a second dimension to analyze in the contexts of nationalism and colonialism. As Azmi also states above, Vlad is still regarded as a national hero in Romania. In fact, in 1976, a commemorative stamp was issued in honour of Vlad to mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death (Beresford 77). He is the ultimate tourist attraction for Romania. On the other hand, many nations had to live under the hegemony of the Ottoman Empire during its reign, including Transylvania. Thus, from Dracula's viewpoint the Turks have been the enemies of his race for centuries: they are the imperialist Eastern power, the primitive "Other" who once tried to colonize his people, and he is the noble warrior of his land who has to take revenge for his ancestors. When viewed in this manner, Dracula's aim can also be interpreted as illustrative of "reverse colonization", as he inwardly believes that the Turks deserve this punishment after all. Therefore, in Seyfi's adaptation, the Count and the Turks switch roles repeatedly; each becomes the coloniser and the colonized at the same time sharing both the guilt of and the fear to which Arata refers.

Discussions of religion and sexuality are also effective in constructing national identity and Seyfi's adaptation reflects Turkish people's approaches to these issues in the

1920s. As Victor Sage suggests, “the horror novel is shaped by the language, imagery and assumptions of a Christian consciousness” (16). However, in order to achieve a transcultural adaptation and create a Turkish Gothic atmosphere, Seyfi changed this Christian tradition for an Islamic tradition. When his Transylvanian hostess in Bistritz gives him a cross for protection from bad spirits and demons, Azmi questions not only her anxious state, but also superstition and religion:

... she took out a cross [...] My situation was quite sensitive. Was she offering it to me to kiss or giving it to me for protection from evil? In truth, I would not persuade my heart to kiss that piece of wood even to please that pure, kind hearted woman. This situation was not only ridiculous for a Muslim but also unpleasant for an intellectual person. I took out my amulet from my neck and said: “Madam, do not worry, look, this is my religion’s book on my neck, and it has almighty God’s words in it. This protects me as well.” The old woman answered: “Very well, but this is harmless too. Keep that... One, all one! God is one, everything, everybody is one.” (Seyfi 16-18)

As a Muslim, Azmi at first finds the old woman’s offer absurd; however, he cannot resist in the face of her concerned manners. Seyfi’s use of the triangular Muslim amulet instead of the Christian cross is only one of the examples of the exchange of religious traditions. Later on in the novel, Dr. Resuhi remarks on another religious exchange: “It [the vampire] is afraid of the Koran and the soil of our Prophet’s grave; in fact, Christians also use their crosses for protection from the vampire. Shortly, the holiness of religion is regarded as a weapon against vampires everywhere.” (168) Seyfi replaces the cross with the amulet and the Bible with the Koran, but the old woman’s words saying that all religions and humans are one, indicates that Seyfi’s purpose in this exchange was not to praise Islam over Christianity, but to create an atmosphere that is familiar to Turkish readers.

Arata argues that “reverse colonization narratives are obsessed with the spectacle of the primitive and the atavistic” and sees Dracula as the Eastern uncivilized, primitive “Other” who threatens the modernization in Britain at the time (624). In Turkey from the 1920s onwards, many efforts were made for modernization to create a secular country that appreciates science instead of bigotry. However, even during this process, religion was not completely excluded. Dr. Resuhi uses the blood transfusion process though he strictly believes in the power of the sacred. By connecting the past and the present, that is, the religious Ottomans and modernized Turkey, Seyfi portrays the religious identity of Turkey in the 1920s.

As a Muslim country in the process of modernization, women and gender were delicate issues in those days. Influenced by the debate over “The Woman Question” that took place in the United Kingdom and Europe during the nineteenth century, women in the Empire were allowed to have certain professions. Selling women as slaves or concubines in the Ottoman lands was prohibited and in the beginning of twentieth century, women could work as government officials. However, the number of women in professional life and education was still very low. After modern Turkey was founded, women’s rights became a prime issue for the new parliament. Due to their active roles in the War of Independence, women were highly respected and many efforts were made by the government to establish equality between men and women. With the Turkish Civil Law of 1926 the role of women in family and society was adjusted to modern standards (Gokcimen 10-11). Laws enforcing women’s rights continued to expand in the following years, creating the modern Turkish woman’s identity.

While Stoker used Mina and Lucy as the face of Victorian women and modernity, Seyfi adapted these female characters by modelling them on the Turkish women of the time. In Stoker’s text, Mina is portrayed as the ideal Victorian woman with her virtuousness and

sophistication. In Seyfi's adaptation, too, Guzin is portrayed as an ideal Turkish girl who is to be the perfect wife, but is also as nationalist as the Turkish men when it comes to her country. In her last diary entry, Guzin writes: "When I read my nation's great history, when I saw, with tearful eyes, the evils that Dracula – this matchless creature that was named as The Black Devil and Voivode the Impaler – did to my gallant nation and the murders he committed, I cursed that I was not born as a Turkish cavalryman four hundred years ago" (165). Guzin is the image of an educated modern Turkish woman with her nationalism. Later, Azmi writes about his astonishment, which turns into admiration of Guzin's strong personality, when he realises that instead of preventing him from going to this war, she supports him and the others since she, herself, is also a true nationalist.

... my Guzin, who is kind as a rose and fragile as a hyacinth, is tough as steel, no, tough as a real Turkish girl, to my surprise. Turkish girl... What measure should be used to choose a Turkish girl? Her proud and wishful state when she sees her lover or her husband attack the hazards, hardships and impediments must be the easiest way to choose. (Seyfi 169)

The emphasis given to the idea of the "Turkish girl" shows that for Seyfi, a Turkish girl is a girl like Guzin who is educated and sophisticated in different subjects, helpful, and caring for her loved ones, open minded to new ideas, and moreover, brave and loyal to her country and race. However, when Guzin wants to join them in this war with "the enemy of her race", the men do not allow it (172). Dr. Resuhi says that she should stay at home and wait for them but never lose her faith in God. Thus, for Seyfi, another feature of the "Turkish girl" is that she is always in the background, as she obeys the men and prays at home. This shows that Seyfi's version of the new Turkish woman identity combines both modernization and a traditional role of woman, and feeds on Turkish nationalism to grow strong.

Sadan, on the other hand, is not as ideal as Guzin and becomes the actual victim of the Count's irresistible attacks. According to Arata, "Dracula not only endangers the personal identity of individuals, but also Britain's integrity as a nation" (630). Moreover, as Botting also claims, "Dracula manages to realise his plans of colonisation through women and their bodies" (98). In Seyfi's adaptation, however, Guzin remains unaffected and Sadan is the only vessel for Dracula to reach the Turkish blood. Sadan is easily victimized by Dracula because of her various weaknesses. She never acts like an unvirtuous girl, but she is too shallow by comparison to Guzin. Sadan cannot go further than being a beautiful woman, while, with her intellectuality and nationalist spirit, Guzin embodies the modernized face of Turkish women. Thus, Dracula can drink, colonize and contaminate the Turkish blood only through Sadan, who represents not only the shallow housewife, but also the old shallow minded state of the country. Meanwhile, unlike Mina in Stoker's text, Guzin never encounters Dracula and remains unharmed, as she is the ideal Turkish woman representing modern Turkey.

### **The First Vampire in Turkish Cinema: *Dracula in Istanbul* (1953)**

In 1953, Count Dracula appeared as a visual character in *Dracula in Istanbul* in Turkish cinemas. The influence of Stoker's text was present, but the film was mostly adapted from Seyfi's *Vlad the Impaler* without even changing the names of the characters. The adaptation was deprived of Seyfi's nationalistic tone, but contrary to the popular belief in the West, it was the first film adaptation to reveal the connection between Vlad Tepes and the Count. The film is also widely accepted as the first Dracula adaptation made by a Muslim country and the first adaptation in which the Count's fangs are seen. Nevertheless, the fact that *Dracula in Istanbul* is Turkish cinema's first horror film indicates that there is more to say about the film in terms of its contribution to the construction of Turkish horror cinema and the Turkish identity that it represents.

*Dracula in Istanbul* is a reinterpretation, as the original story line does not fully change, but the modifications create a new retelling of the Dracula story which makes it another transcultural adaptation. Hutcheon argues that “these stories adapt just as they are adapted, and that alterations are therefore necessary and inevitable outcome of creativity” (31). One of the basic alterations in the process of transcultural adaptation is again a shift in time and place. As the title hints, in *Dracula in Istanbul*, the destination of Dracula changes from England to Istanbul, as it also does in Seyfi’s novel, and the story takes place in the 1950s instead of the late nineteenth century. Apart from this shift, *Dracula in Istanbul* also changes the cultural associations constructed in the original text, making the synchrony between the context and the meaning available to Turkish audiences.

The unprecedented representation of the historical connection between Vlad Tepes and Dracula in *Dracula in Istanbul* has been already suggested by several Western scholars (Silver and Ursini 155; Joslin 47). In the film, when Azmi (J. Harker) and Dracula spend their first night in the castle, Dracula tells Azmi that everybody is afraid of him as they think him cruel like his ancestor Vlad the Impaler. While Azmi wanders around the ancient castle, the audience sees steel armour and swords that would remind them of medieval knights. In this context, the setting also helps the audience to recognize the connection between the Count and Vlad. As Julie Sanders suggests, adaptation can constitute a simpler way of making texts “relevant” or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships (19). Thus, the purpose of this connection is obviously to engage attention and create a sense of familiarity for Turkish viewers. However, when the shift in religion was shown on the screen, a new dimension was added to the altered cultural associations.

As the director and scriptwriter used Seyfi’s adaptation as a source text, the shift from Christian to Islamic tradition retains Seyfi’s use of religious imagery with slight differences. In the very beginning of Stoker’s story and in Tod Browning’s adaptation *Dracula* (1931), a



Transylvanian woman warns Jonathan Harker and gives him a cross to protect himself. In *Dracula in Istanbul*, when the woman warns Azmi not to go to Dracula's castle, he shows his "cevşen" – an Islamic amulet with prayers written inside it – to show that he does not believe in superstitions and says: "I only believe in my Allah". In Stoker's text and Browning's *Dracula*, the cross on Harker's neck prohibits Dracula from biting him when he gets a paper-cut. In *Dracula in Istanbul*, however, the cross is replaced with a "cevşen" in the same scene. Furthermore, instead of the Bible and holy water, Dr. Naci (Van Helsing) gives pocket size Korans to the vampire hunter team for protection. This change in religious traditions and iconography makes it easier for the Turkish audience to empathize with Azmi and the other characters.

Although religion is regarded as the ultimate way to scare away the vampire, garlic also plays a significant role in this war against Dracula. In Dracula's castle, Azmi meets a male servant who looks like a mixture of Renfield, the hunchback of Notre Dame and Frankenstein's assistant Igor in Universal's adaptations. Azmi gives him his cigarette case and in return for the favor, the servant saves his life by winding a bunch of garlic around his neck, and is himself violently killed by Dracula because of this. Dr. Naci states that Sadan, who was bitten by Dracula and is still under his effect, can only be killed by filling her mouth with garlic and staking her in the heart. Azmi also uses garlic several times to scare away Dracula and to save Guzin from getting bitten. At the end of the film, Azmi throws away all of the garlic inside their house and on Guzin's neck, saying that he is fed up with garlic and its smell. Guzin's reaction here adds a comical effect to the idea of garlic as a weapon: "But I could have used them for stuffed eggplant!" Stuffed eggplant is an authentic Turkish recipe that contains a lot of garlic. This last scene portrays an aspect of Turkish identity by defusing the threat of the vampire with domestic humor calculated to appeal to the national audience.

*Dracula in Istanbul* was also the first time that the vampire in its visual form was introduced to Turkish audiences. Peter Hutchings suggests that “the history of the Dracula story is a history of constant reinterpretation” (79). Likewise, creating Dracula’s character is itself a reinterpretation. While Max Schreck creates a monstrous vampire figure in *Nosferatu* (1922), Bela Lugosi portrays the aristocratic face of the vampire in Browning’s adaptation. Although his baldness resembles *Nosferatu*, Atif Kaptan can be associated with Bela Lugosi’s Dracula rather than with *Nosferatu*, as he wears a tuxedo and, in some scenes, a cloak that helps him to change into a bat. Turgut Demirag, the producer of *Dracula in Istanbul* – who studied in the USA and worked in Paramount Studios – admits that he was influenced by Bela Lugosi and Max Schreck and explains his casting decision in an interview: “I chose Atif Kaptan for Dracula deliberately because his facial features, eyes, looks, physical appearance, and acting talent were the most appropriate for this character” (Scognamillo and Demirhan 64). Indeed, like all the other vampire films, Kaptan’s eyes and looks, play a significant role in creating the Dracula character, as the hypnotic influence of the Count’s looks are used in the film.

Another significant feature of this Turkish-made Dracula was that he had fangs. In *Dracula: A British Film Guide*, Peter Hutchings claims that Dracula’s fangs were first shown in *Horror of Dracula* (1958):

Hammer’s poster offered something new as well. The fangs, for example. Lugosi had not worn fangs; nor had any of his vampiric successors [...] To find a befanged vampire, you would have had to track down a critically acclaimed but hard-to-see German film from 1922, F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Terror*, and even there the fangs were different, rodent-like incisors rather than the more dignified canine fangs sported by the Hammer Dracula. (7)

Peter Hutchings was right: Nosferatu had fangs but they were two front teeth like a rabbit's or a rat's and not retractable. However, Hutchings was also wrong because *Dracula in Istanbul* was the first film that showed Dracula with his fangs. These fangs were both retractable and could even be seen when Dracula's mouth was closed. In fact, just before the title sequence, the audience sees Dracula's wide open dull eyes as if they are hypnotizing and then, they see his fangs with a pullback shot. Within the film, Dracula's fangs are seen a few more times when his hunger for blood is aroused, particularly in the paper cut scene and his scenes with Sadan and Guzin.

Vampirism and sexual desire are two concepts that have been associated with each other since the birth of the vampire narrative and they have been repeatedly discussed and developed into new dimensions through adaptations. With the influence of rising interest in gender identity and Queer studies in the early 1970s, sexuality discussions about *Dracula* and other vampire narratives have also expanded. The vampire's hunger for blood has since been read as a representation of his sexual desire for both females and males and its bite is considered as an act of sexual intercourse as much as a way of survival. William Hughes comments on this as such:

In its sexualized quest for blood ... the vampire is capable of disrupting what have been culturally perceived as discrete patterns of sexual behaviour, and of evading the taboos that polarise heterosexuality and homosexuality. The vampire represents, in this sense, the liberation of those sexual activities or desires that have been allegedly proscribed or censored in society or repressed within the self. (199)

Arguments relating to sexuality in *Dracula* particularly target the arrival of Dracula while the three sirens were about to drink Harker's blood. This scene is not included in Browning's 1931 adaptation. Seyfi's adaptation, on the other hand, includes this scene in which Dracula

reprimands the sirens for touching Harker, who belongs to him. In *Dracula in Istanbul* this scene is also offered; although there is only one woman, it is reproduced in the same spirit. Azmi walks into a room and falls asleep from the effects of the sleeping gas that comes out of the eyes of the Nosferatu painting on the wall. When the woman comes and tries to kiss Azmi, Dracula scolds her, emphasising that Azmi belongs to him, and adds: “Your turn will come too but first, me!” When the woman leaves with a baby that Dracula brought for her, Dracula awakens Azmi and compassionately helps him to stand up and walk to his room. Either to show sexual affection or hospitality as a host, Dracula’s desire for blood is reflected through his tenderness towards Azmi in this scene.

In Seyfi’s novel adaptation, Dracula’s desire for blood was not discussed as sexual, but in the context of race and nation. Therefore, in *Dracula in Istanbul*, perhaps the most effective creative change made by the director and the scriptwriter is the way of addressing sexuality. In Seyfi’s adaptation, Guzin was a teacher’s assistant with a deep interest in history and was also portrayed as the perfect modern Turkish woman. However, in *Dracula in Istanbul*, Guzin is a show girl. When the story shifts from Transylvania to Istanbul, the audience sees a flashing sign for Guzin’s show and a big stage with a closed curtain. When the curtain is opened, Guzin starts to do the cha-cha dance in a special frilled costume. In another scene, Guzin becomes a belly dancer and dances to an oriental song with a palace setting behind. As is widely known, belly-dancing is still a popular dance in Turkey and a part of Turkish culture. Scognamillo and Demirhan suggest that “for years what represented Istanbul on the silver screen were beautiful belly dancers dancing in front of a palace setting” (65). In this respect, Guzin’s profession not only emphasises sexuality but also shows the emphasis given to cultural heritage when creating a transcultural adaptation.

This shift from teacher’s assistant to lead dancer makes Guzin the actual object of Dracula’s sexual desire. The first encounter between Dracula and Guzin takes place in

Guzin's house. Guzin comes home from work and starts to undress herself. In this scene her sexual desirability is stressed, particularly when she goes to the bathroom and takes off all her remaining clothes to get into the foamy bathtub. The camera pans down to her legs and the audience understands that she is completely naked. While having her bath, she hears some noises and goes to check wearing her bathrobe. All of a sudden, Dracula appears in front of her. The camera shows Dracula's eyes with a close-up shot and Guzin faints. Just as the Count is about to feed on her, Azmi arrives and scares Dracula away with garlic. However, the climax occurs when Dracula finds Guzin towards the end of the film. After completing her performance, Guzin is about to leave the theatre when she sees Dracula waiting for her on the stage. The hypnotizing influence of Dracula's eyes is stressed again with another close-up shot and Dracula starts speaking slowly with his deep voice: "You are an amazing creature. I am going to drink your blood bit by bit. Tonight you will dance only for me." The piano starts to play by itself, which is a cleverly conceived detail, and Guzin dances for Dracula in a white dress representing her purity and virtue as an engaged woman. Having watched her in admiration, Dracula's sexual desires are heightened and he gets closer to Guzin to bite her. Once again, Azmi comes to save his fiancée and scares the Count away with garlic. In both scenes Guzin's beauty and sexuality are represented through her body. Moreover, Guzin's belly-dancing scenes complete the process of localization of the story while adapting the work from one culture to another.

Another reason for this creative alteration in the adaptation process was of course due to commercial concerns and the situation of the film industry. The 1950s were the years of development and innovation for Turkish cinema. Until the end of the Second World War, Turkish cinema was mostly controlled by people from the theatre industry. It was only after 1945 that Turkish cinema increased its film production. Until then, Egyptian films with songs and dance became one of the most popular genres of the time ('Turk Sinema Tarihine Genel

Bir Bakis', [sinema.gov.tr](http://sinema.gov.tr)). Influenced by Egyptian cinema, the Turkish melodrama form was constructed. This is a form in which women are portrayed as sufferers who find themselves singing on the stage at some point during the film. In *Dracula in Istanbul*, too, both the effect of these Egyptian films and the melodrama form are perceivable. While Sadan portrays the woman who suffers, Guzin portrays the woman on the stage, and both are victimized by Dracula. Therefore, while adapting a Western literary myth, *Dracula in Istanbul* combines one of the most popular genres of the time with a fresh genre for the Turkish audience: the Gothic.

In fact, the first horror film of Turkish cinema was *Scream*, which was made by a young director called Aydin Arakon in 1949. The story starts on a rough night; a doctor comes to a mysterious mansion in which he meets a girl who has been driven mad by her uncle because of an inheritance issue. However, the film did not get much attention and got lost over the years (Scognamillo and Demirhan 63). Thus, *Dracula in Istanbul* is accepted as the first horror film in Turkish cinema, as it is the earliest that has survived until today. Even though the film seems quite simple and superficial in effects by today's standards, for its time, it had a high budget compared to others and achieved box office success. The producer, Turgut Demirag, remarks that "the shooting took seven weeks and that all indoor scenes and a few outdoor ones were shot on a set" (Scognamillo and Demirhan 64). The art director of the film, Sohban Kologlu, says that he and his crew "made an extra effort for the bats and armour, for Dracula's downhill scrambling, and for the model of Dracula's castle". He also adds that one of the main deficiencies of the equipment was a fog machine, and to create fog, especially in cemetery scenes, "a group of thirty or more people from the crew with at least three cigarettes in their mouths had to lie down on the floor and puff smoke during the shooting" (Scognamillo and Demirhan 66).

Despite all these difficulties, the director and his team worked hard to create a better production than the other films of its time, but they could still not avoid some harsh criticism. In one of the most popular cinema magazine of the time, *Yildiz*, Sezai Solelli criticizes the film in his column “The Man on the Luxurious Chair” claiming that the film is “neither scary nor funny”. He also criticizes the cinematography, suggesting it is too dark (qtd. in Scognamillo and Demirhan 68). However, the cinematography is what creates a Gothic effect. According to Scognamillo and Demirhan, the film is the first trial in Turkish cinema into creating an atmosphere rather than a horror film (68-71), and it succeeds in doing that particularly in the scenes that take place in Dracula’s castle. Thus, the Gothic atmosphere that these scenes and the rest of the film create is a first in Turkish cinema. *Dracula in Istanbul* succeeds in initiating the Gothic mode in Turkish cinema and becomes a Turkish classic on several counts.

### **Tracking down Turkish Gothic for Globalgothic**

Linda Hutcheon suggests that “an adaptation is not vampiric” since it keeps the original “alive” by “giving it an afterlife”, instead of leaving it to die or getting paler after sucking its life source (176). Indeed, the adaptations of *Dracula* in Turkish literature and film do not deteriorate or warp the original as Turkish critics thought for a long time, but they give the original a new impulse – a Turkish impulse – and maintain the popularity of the Dracula myth within a Turkish context. When creating an adaptation from another culture, an adapter reinterprets – as Hutcheon would say – creating a familiar world for their audience from a pre-existing world. Thus, as transcultural reinterpretations, *Vlad the Impaler* and *Dracula in Istanbul* construct the synchrony between the context and the meaning sifting the original text through a cultural transformation. Seyfi’s adaptation serves as an embodiment of Turkish nationalism in the 1920s, particularly due to its praise of Turkishness and its tone of protest against Western imperialism, which is represented in Count Dracula’s character. He depicts a

very accurate picture of Turkey's historical, political and cultural state in the 1920s. *Dracula in Istanbul*, on the other hand, creates an inception point for producing the Gothic atmosphere in Turkish cinema. The film, as a transcultural adaptation, is notably creative at reflecting Turkishness through domestic aspects such as belly-dancing and Turkish cuisine, and addresses sexuality through Guzin's dancing profession.

Scognamillo and Demirhan argue that a national Gothic tradition does not yet exist in Turkey ('Korkunun Turkcesi'). It is true that, although these adaptations contributed dramatically to the emergence of the Gothic genre in Turkey, the Gothic did not become popular until the late 1980s, around when the globalization process entered Turkish people's lives, and has still not been established as a genre, at least not officially. The reasons for its unpopularity were mostly due to political and social instabilities between the 1950s and 1980s. The earlier nationalist propaganda of the 1920s and these instabilities together created the understanding that realist works were better suited for educating people and transmitting society's problems and concerns. Fantasy and horror were regarded as unrealistic compared to the social problems of those crucial times. Another reason was the cultural differences between Western Gothic and Turkish culture. As the Gothic has always been associated with the Christian tradition and iconography, Turkish writers and filmmakers had difficulties when trying to create the genre within the Turkish cultural context. One of the reasons that the genre emerged later in Turkish literature than in Christian cultures is seen as the difference in religious beliefs (Yucesoy 42-43). Indeed, religious imagery used within the Gothic genre in Turkey shows, and should show, different interpretations of the Gothic that have developed in Christian countries. However, the fact that the Gothic has been embraced by many cultures that are not Christian in origin negates this argument. Japanese Gothic or Malaysian Gothic are only two examples of many. Particularly, the recent Globalgothic studies prove that the genre is adaptable and transformable to any culture as long as the conventions are met.



Although adapted before Globalgothic term was established, *Vlad the Impaler* and *Dracula in Istanbul* are perfect examples of transcultural adaptations which initiated the inclusion of the Gothic in Turkish studies and offer a starting point for tracking down the Gothic genre in Turkey. These adaptations managed to create the Gothic atmosphere in Turkish contexts by using representations of national identity and thus, they form the origins of Turkish Gothic. However, they cannot define what Turkish Gothic is on their own. Since Globalgothic also emphasises the role of national identity and culture while looking at the counterparts of Western Gothic in other cultures, critical analysis of works which pursue the path that these *Dracula* adaptations opened and that reflect the fears and desires of Turkish people in the modern globalized age, will reveal the characteristics of Turkish Gothic much clearly. This kind of study is needed not only in Turkish studies but also in Globalgothic studies. At the moment, Turkish Gothic is invisible in the scope of Globalgothic, but its heyday surely is around the corner.

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